

Bible Study Summary: St. Thomas Aquinas' First Way (The Argument from Motion)

With Background on the *Summa Theologiae*

Introduction

One of the greatest theologians in the history of the Church is St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). A Dominican friar, priest, philosopher, and Doctor of the Church, Aquinas sought to demonstrate that faith and reason are not enemies but partners in the search for truth.

His most famous work is the *Summa Theologiae* ("Summary of Theology"), written between 1265 and 1274. It was intended as a systematic guide for students of theology, presenting Christian doctrine in a clear and organized way.

The *Summa* follows a distinctive format:

1. A question is posed.
2. Objections are presented.
3. Aquinas gives an authoritative response.
4. He answers each objection.

This method teaches believers not merely what to think, but how to think.

Where the First Way Appears

In Part I, Question 2, Article 3, Aquinas asks:

"Whether God exists?"

He then offers what have become known as the **Five Ways**, five philosophical arguments demonstrating the existence of God through reason.

The First Way is called:

The Argument from Motion

Understanding Motion

When Aquinas uses the word "motion," he means more than physical movement from one place to another.

Motion means:

The change from potentiality to actuality.

For example:

- An acorn has the potential to become an oak tree.
- Water has the potential to become ice.
- A child has the potential to become an adult.

Motion is the process by which something that could be becomes something that is.

Aquinas' Argument

The argument unfolds in several steps.

Step 1: Things Are Moving

Aquinas begins with an observation:

Things in the world change.

This is obvious to everyone.

Plants grow.

People age.

Water freezes.

Stars move.

Nothing controversial here.

Step 2: Whatever Is Moved Is Moved by Another

A thing cannot give itself a characteristic it does not already possess.

For example:

- Wood can potentially become hot.
- Fire is already hot.
- Fire causes the wood to become actually hot.

The wood cannot make itself hot if it is not already hot.

Something actual must cause the potential to become actual.

Step 3: There Cannot Be an Infinite Regress

If every motion requires a mover, we must ask:

"What moved the mover?"

And then:

"What moved that mover?"

Aquinas argues that if there were no first source of motion, there could be no motion now.

His example is similar to a series of train cars.

If every car is being pulled by another car, but there is no engine, the train never moves.

There must be an originating source.

Step 4: Therefore There Must Be a First Unmoved Mover

Aquinas concludes:

There must exist a being that causes motion without itself being moved by another.

This is what he calls the **Unmoved Mover**.

And this being, he says,

"Everyone understands to be God."

Biblical Foundations

Although Aquinas develops a philosophical argument, Scripture supports the same truth.

Exodus 3:14

"I AM WHO AM."

God reveals Himself as pure existence, dependent on no one.

Acts 17:28

"In him we live and move and have our being."

Everything that exists depends upon God.

Colossians 1:16-17

"All things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

Christ sustains all creation.

Hebrews 1:3

"He sustains all things by his powerful word."

Creation continues because God continuously upholds it.

Common Misunderstanding

Many people think Aquinas is asking:

"Who started the universe?"

That is not exactly his argument.

The First Way is not primarily about what happened long ago.

It is about what is happening right now.

Aquinas is asking:

Why is anything changing at this moment?

His answer:

Because all finite things depend upon an ultimate source of actuality that is itself uncaused and independent.

Spiritual Reflection

The First Way is not merely an intellectual exercise.

It teaches us something profound about God.

Everything around us is changing:

- Our health changes.
- Relationships change.
- Governments change.
- Cultures change.

But God does not change.

As Scripture says:

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." (Hebrews 13:8)

Because God is the Unmoved Mover, He is utterly reliable.

Because He is not dependent on anything else, we can depend completely on Him.

Discussion Questions

1. What examples of "motion" or change do you see in everyday life?
 2. Why does Aquinas believe that something actual must cause change?
 3. How is the First Way different from simply saying, "Everything has a cause"?
 4. What does God's title "I AM" reveal about His nature?
 5. How does believing in God as the Unmoved Mover strengthen our trust during times of change?
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Key Takeaway

St. Thomas Aquinas' First Way begins with a simple observation: things change. From that observation, he reasons that all change requires a cause, and that the chain of causes cannot continue indefinitely. Therefore, there must exist a First Unmoved Mover—One who causes all things to exist and act while depending on nothing else.

For Aquinas, this First Unmoved Mover is not merely a force or principle, but the living God revealed in Scripture: the One in whom all things live, move, and have their being.
